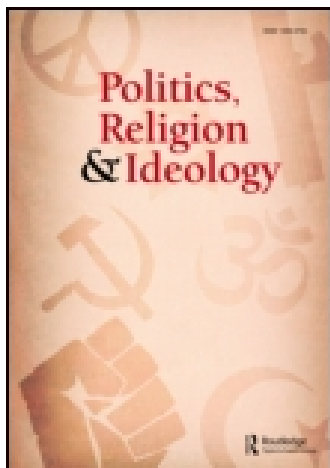


This article was downloaded by: [Linköping University Library]

On: 24 August 2014, At: 00:10

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Politics, Religion & Ideology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ftmp21>

### Alfred Rosenberg: The Nazi Weltanschauung as Modern Gnosis

Amit Varshizky<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Tel Aviv University

Published online: 11 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: Amit Varshizky (2012) Alfred Rosenberg: The Nazi Weltanschauung as Modern Gnosis, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13:3, 311-331, DOI: [10.1080/21567689.2012.698977](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2012.698977)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2012.698977>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

## Alfred Rosenberg: The Nazi *Weltanschauung* as Modern Gnosis

AMIT VARSHIZKY\*

Tel Aviv University

**ABSTRACT** *The present article attempts to shed light on the Gnostic infrastructure underlying the philosophy of Alfred Rosenberg, chief ideologue of the Nazi movement, based on his book The Myth of the Twentieth Century and other writings. Within this frame of reference I wish to elaborate on Eric Voegelin and Hans Jonas' early characterization of Nazism as 'Modern Gnosis', applying their theoretical framework to Rosenberg's Weltanschauung. I would like to suggest a structural analysis of Rosenberg's political religion, and to point out the way theological–Gnostic principles were translated into a racial–secular eschatology, while performing a conceptual reversal in Gnostic thought that converted the transcendental God into an immanent manifestation of the race-soul. This transfiguration of Gnostic transcendence into an 'immanent' or 'organic' worldview, which considers nature or race as a divine substance and the primary source of life, enabled Rosenberg to turn the Nordic man into the founding subject of history, and to transform politics into an instrument that facilitates racial redemption.*

### Introduction

Alfred Rosenberg has not always received the attention he deserves in Third Reich historiography. Many historians tended to underplay his importance in light of his being a minor political figure with relatively limited power in the Nazi party apparatus. At the same time, most scholars do recognize his importance with respect to the formation and establishment of Nazi ideology. This approach to Rosenberg and his writings relies mostly on statements made by senior Nazi figures, some of whom were his sworn political enemies,<sup>1</sup> more specifically on Hitler's public denunciation of Rosenberg's main text *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* and its anti-Christian nature. Hitler's statement, according to which he had

---

\*Email: amitvarshizky@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>Thus, for example, historians tend to cite Goebbels' reference to *The Myth* as an 'ideological hiccup'. See Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity 1919–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 93; Joachim C. Fest, *The Face of the Third Reich* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), pp. 165, 173. On the other hand, it should be noted that in January 1937, during the first award ceremony of the national prize for art and science, Goebbels commended Rosenberg's contribution, stating that 'Rosenberg has with his works most excellently helped in intuitively founding and strengthening the scientific ideology of National Socialism', and added that 'only a later age will fully appreciate how deep the influence of this man has been upon the spiritual and ideological formation of the National Socialistic state'. See Fritz Nova, *Alfred Rosenberg: Nazi Theorist of the Holocaust* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1986) p. 2. See also Irvin Hexham's important observations on the matter, in Irvin Hexham, 'Inventing "Paganists": A Close Reading of Richard Steigmann-Gall's *The Holy Reich*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42:1 (2007), pp. 59–78.

read only small bits of Rosenberg's book and found it unreadable, is well known, as is the fact that the book was read mostly by the Church and by the Party's rivals. Hitler also insisted the book should not be regarded as official party doctrine,<sup>2</sup> and it was indeed never published as an official party text. Historian Robert Cecil argues that Hitler wouldn't have authorized the book's publication without being intimately familiar with its contents, adding that it is fairly naïve to think that Hitler believed he could distance himself and the party from a text written by one of its senior members, and published by its official publishing house.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Hitler's attitude towards *The Myth* should be regarded as part of his political pragmatism, and his effort to maintain diplomatic relations with the Church, rather than as an expression of his personal opinion.

Rosenberg's January 1934 appointment as head of the office in charge of ideology and education in the Reich (*Amt für die Überwachung der gesamten geistigen und weltanschaulichen Schulung und Erziehung der NSDAP*) leaves no doubt as to the importance Hitler assigned to the man and his ideas.<sup>4</sup> Uriel Tal argues that, while Rosenberg and his office held no power within the party apparatus, nor had any influence on foreign affairs, his involvement in political indoctrination and ideology formation did have a profound effect among the general public, as well as among certain groups within the party, such as the SA and the SS.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, his position as chief editor of the party's main newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, seems to have allowed him to instill his views among certain audiences, and to spread his *The Myth* among the various educational institutes of the Reich.

Yet another reason scholars underestimate the importance of Rosenberg and his intellectual work has to do with his religious–mystical approach, and the spiritual and irrational nature of his thought. Thus, for example, Karl Bracher called Rosenberg an 'impractical theorist'<sup>6</sup> and his book 'nonsensical'.<sup>7</sup> Joachim Fest called him 'the forgotten disciple', presenting him as lacking influence and charisma, and as 'a prophet without honour in his own country'.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Fest argued *The Myth* 'was based on emotional arguments. . . safeguarded against any objective, logical refutation'.<sup>9</sup> Reinhard Bollmus presented Rosenberg as the chief force behind the 'irrationalization' of Nazi ideology. Bollmus highlights Hitler's objection to Rosenberg's religious approach, juxtaposing Hitler's 'rationalism'

<sup>2</sup>See Hitler quoted in H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's Table Talks, 1941–1944* (New York: Octagon Books, 1976), p. 422. Robert Cecil points out that one should consider the fact these remarks were recorded by Bormann, who was known for his hostility to Rosenberg.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1972), pp. 100–101.

<sup>4</sup>Irvin Hexham points to Hitler's personal letter to Rosenberg on his fiftieth birthday as testifying to the former's personal appreciation for Rosenberg and his intellectual work. In his letter Hitler calls Rosenberg 'The first spiritual and intellectual co-builder of the party', adding that 'one day history will record how much you did to clarify and stabilize the world-view foundations of the movement'. Quoted in Hexham, *Inventing*, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup>Tal argues that Hitler's distancing himself from Rosenberg's doctrine was due to two main reasons. First, pragmatic considerations of public opinion, and the will to retain good relations with the church. Second, fear of the potential power of an autonomous, rival ideology of race, blood and soil, which grants these ideas a mythical validity that goes beyond politics, and possibly beyond the *Führer* himself; an ideology that might have developed into 'an absolutized political religion, which takes prior place to the *Führer*, endowing him with its charismatic authority instead of designating the *Führertum* as the only source of all authority and obedience'. See Uriel Tal, *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich. Selected Essays* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 31–32, 45 (note 58).

<sup>6</sup>Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship: The Origins, Structure, And Effects of National Socialism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 282.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>Fest, *The Face*, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 167.

with Rosenberg's 'mysticism'.<sup>10</sup> These examples might point to the inherent problems in the way historians approach Rosenberg and his thought: it appears that the irrational and mystical character of *The Myth* drove away scholars, and significantly contributed to its image as a pseudo-intellectual text that does not deserve to be included under the heading of 'intellectual history'. George Mosse, in *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964), has already pointed out historians' tendency to underestimate the importance of religious and irrational elements in *Volkish* thought. He argued this derives first and foremost from their habit of projecting their own standards and values on their research subjects, applying rational judgment to a philosophy that is originally intended as anti-rationalistic.<sup>11</sup> Emilio Gentile, in his study on Italian Fascism, also emphasized the importance of assuming an unbiased approach, pointing out the problematic nature of a historiography that 'seeks to restore rationality to a phenomenon that, though not without its own historical rationality, was sited deliberately and ostentatiously in the camp of the irrational'.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the very same 'religious' nature of Rosenberg's work that drove away many historians led to an increased interest by scholars of political religions, as part of the revival of this field in the 1990s. In this context, *The Myth* served as a paradigmatic case study of the ideological mechanisms that enabled the transfiguration of theological models into the political arena. Generally speaking, one can distinguish two approaches to Rosenberg and his political theology. The first regards Rosenberg's work as a secularization of Christian principles, translating them into a radical, racial utopia. Clauss-Ekkehard Bärsch, for example, pointed out the Protestant foundations of Rosenberg's thought, arguing that, despite his radical anti-clericalism and explicit hostility towards the Church, his worldview was predominantly based on a racialized Protestantism, which drew on Meister Eckhart.<sup>13</sup> Bärsch's view corresponds with prior works of scholars like Mosse, Klaus Vondung, and Fritz Stern, who pointed to the way Nazism adopted Christian symbols, while injecting them with racist content.<sup>14</sup> The second approach categorizes Rosenberg's views as 'pagan', 'neo-pagan', or 'pantheistic'.<sup>15</sup> It relies mostly on his fierce objection to the Christian

<sup>10</sup>Reinhard Bollmus, 'Alfred Rosenberg: National Socialism's "Chief Ideologue"?' in Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann (eds) *The Nazi Elite* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 185–186.

<sup>11</sup>George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: A Universal Library, 1964), pp. 1–2. It is interesting to note how Mosse, who deals extensively with the intellectual and spiritual origins of Nazism, also hardly relates to Rosenberg in his writings.

<sup>12</sup>Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. xi.

<sup>13</sup>Clauss-Ekkehard Bärsch, 'Alfred Rosenbergs "Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts" als politische Religion' in Hans Maier and Michael Schäfer (eds) *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen*, Vol. II (Paderborn Schöningh, 2003), pp. 205–225.

<sup>14</sup>George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York: Fertig, 1975), p. 80; Klaus Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation Ideologischer Kult und Politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971); Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). Also noteworthy are Norman Cohn and James Rhodes' studies, which regard Nazism as a millenarian movement, a political religion based on Joachimite Christianity, offering a politics of salvation. See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957); James M. Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution* (California: Hoover Institution Press, 1980).

<sup>15</sup>There is vast literature on Nazism as an outburst of pagan revolt against the Christian world. The roots of this narrative can be traced to the 1930s Church criticism of Nazism, as well as other contemporary observers. For example, the Jewish-American writer Ludwig Lewison described Nazism as 'a pagan revolt against the whole of Christian civilization'. See Ludwig Lewison, 'The Revolt Against Civilization' in Pierre van Paassen and James Waterman Wise (eds) *Nazism: Assault on Civilization* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1934), pp. 143–160. This approach was intensified with the allies' wartime Anti-Nazi propaganda. A good example is the journalist and folklorist Lewis Spence's *The Occult Causes of the Present War*. Spence describes Nazis as the

church, and his attempt to constitute Nazism as a 'religion of blood', free of any transcendental elements, and relying on immanent, natural categories like blood and soil. For the most part, the term 'pagan' is used in a manner that fails to indicate the true nature of Rosenberg's theology, but rather as a pejorative that is borrowed directly from Christian apologetics. In *The Holy Reich* (2003), Richard Steigmann-Gall describes Rosenberg as 'the most prominent paganist in the Nazi party',<sup>16</sup> arguing that he rejected the party's positive Christianity, seeking to replace it with a new religion, free of Judeo-Christian elements and based on Germanic ones. At the same time, Steigmann-Gall points out that, 'although it may appear plain that Rosenberg's ideology constituted a rejection of Christianity, Rosenberg himself saw it instead as a revision. Although he made reference to Nordic gods in *The Myth*, this was not a typically paganist appropriation'.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Steigmann-Gall emphasizes Rosenberg's rejection of contemporary neo-pagan and occultist ideas and his affinity with Protestantism, which was typical of other party seniors as well. The result is that, with Steigmann-Gall, Rosenberg's paganism remains a vague notion that relies mostly on his well-known opposition to the Church, rather than a concrete characterization of his metaphysical and theological doctrine.

A similar approach can be found in Michael Burleigh's work. Burleigh describes Nazism as a political religion that offered a creative synthesis between a 'science run riot' and a 'bastardized Christianity'.<sup>18</sup> He argues that 'this political religion had little to do with neo-paganism, which was a distraction from the pseudo-religious properties of Nazism itself', adding that, for Hitler, 'both neo-paganism and efforts to Nazify Christianity itself were second-order considerations'.<sup>19</sup> Rosenberg is described as the chief neo-pagan, and his ideology as a minority view that had no real influence on Nazi politics.<sup>20</sup> Both Burleigh and Steigmann-Gall assign Rosenberg only a marginal role in party circles, and their classification of him as 'pagan' is merely pejorative: it adopts Christian apologetics, and serves their aim of emphasizing the central role of Christian elements that underlie the Nazi worldview.<sup>21</sup>

This article suggests a different perspective for examining Rosenberg's political religion. My main claim is that his political theology was based not on Christian eschatology, whether Augustine or Joachimite, nor can it be regarded as any kind of paganism or pantheism. Instead, it was based on a secularized Gnostic thought, and on a transfiguration of its eschatological dualism. The view of Nazism as modern Gnosis is not new, and relies mainly on the works of Eric Voegelin and Hans Jonas. Voegelin characterized modern ideologies, including Nazism and communism, as political religions that seek a state of perfection through revolutionary transfiguration, based on Gnostic insights. In *The New Science of Politics* (1952) he describes totalitarianism as offering a form of escape from

---

worldly agents of Satan, and the war as an apocalyptic struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness. In a pseudo-scientific analysis of its mythology and history, Spence describes the German nation as having strayed off the path of Christian civilization, adopting a barbaric paganism that seeks to enforce upon the enlightened, Christian world. See Lewis Spence, *The Occult Causes of the Present War* (London: Rider & Co., 1940).

<sup>16</sup>Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy*, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup>Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 253–254.

<sup>20</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 12–13, 253.

<sup>21</sup>A similar apologetics, juxtaposing Rosenberg's paganism to Hitler's religious position, can be found as early as the 1930s, in the context of the Christian polemic around *The Myth*. See, for example, the reference by Protestant theologian Helmuth Schreiner, who would later become one of the central spokespersons of the 'Faithful Church' (*Bekennende Kirche*): Helmuth Schreiner, *Der Nationalsozialismus vor der Gottesfrage – Illusion oder Evangelium?* (Berlin-Spandau, 1931), pp. 31–32.

the uncertainty of human existence, by replacing it with a search for absolute knowledge regarding human essence. He identified the roots of this process, which he labeled as 'immanentisation of transcendence' (*Immanentisierung der Transzendenz*), in the twelfth-century Joachimite–eschatological interpretation of the Book of Revelation, which for the first time displayed history as an arena for the realization of kingdom of heaven. Voegelin regards this transfiguration of the divine into the worldly and mundane sphere of human existence as the Gnostic infrastructure that underlies modern thought.<sup>22</sup>

Jonas too points to the Gnostic theological infrastructure of modernity, which he believes needs to be overcome. In 1934 he published his monumental *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, which redefined Gnosis during his time, and is still considered the most prominent and influential text on the subject.<sup>23</sup> In it, Jonas laid the foundations to his existentialist interpretation of Gnosticism, which reached its mature form in his *Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism* (1959), as well as in the final chapter of his republished study from 1958 *Gnosticism, Nihilism and Existentialism*. Jonas pointed to the inherent affinity between Gnosticism and the existential categories of his mentor, Heidegger, arguing that Gnostic dualism, which regards man as alienated from the world, constitutes a modern form of nihilism that culminated in Nazism.<sup>24</sup> Both Voegelin and Jonas discuss the Gnostic character of Nazism in a wider context of the crisis of modernity, regarding it as symptomatic to its period. However, their 'Gnostic' interpretation of Nazism does not stand at the center of their analysis, and does not sufficiently account for the particular nature of Nazi ideology within its historical context. In this article I would ask to elaborate on the early distinction of the two, and to apply their theoretical framework to Rosenberg's worldview.

The article elaborates the Gnostic framework underlying Rosenberg's *Weltanschauung*, through a structural analysis of his political theology, based on the three main tenets that comprise the Gnostic theological speculation according to Hans Jonas: dualism, transcendental monism and eschatology.<sup>25</sup> This analysis will demonstrate how the Gnostic model is used as a metaphysical infrastructure for formulating a racist, secular eschatology, through a conceptual transfiguration of the transcendental god into an immanent manifestation of the race-soul. Within this framework I shall also elaborate on Rosenberg's historiosophic attitude to Gnostic heresy, demonstrating how Gnosticism – in the context of the Manichean cosmology delineated by Rosenberg – is labeled as a 'Nordic Christianity' or

<sup>22</sup>Eric Voegelin, 'The New Science of Politics: An Introduction' in Manfred Henningsen (ed.) *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol 5: Modernity Without Restraint* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 75–243. Voegelin's symbolic and flexible use of Gnostic categories has been criticized by scholars like Gilles Quispel and Hans Jonas, who voiced reservations about drawing a parallel between ancient Gnosticism and modern ideologies, and criticized Voegelin for doing injustice to historical Gnosticism. I tend to agree with Klaus Vondung's critique, according to which Voegelin's conception of Gnosis did injustice to its historical origins, and in fact describes a mixture of several apocalyptic traditions. See Klaus Vondung, 'Eric Voegelin, the crisis of Western Civilization, and the Apocalypse' in Stephan A. McKnight and G.L. Price (eds) *International Interdisciplinary perspectives on Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), p.119.

<sup>23</sup>Recent writing on the historical phenomenon of Gnosticism has taken aim at the term and has declared it incoherent. In this frame of reference 'Gnosticism' was interpreted as a mere modern reconstruction. This critic was referred mostly to Jonas' typological construct of Gnosticism as being an invented category rather than historical phenomenon. See Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling A Dubious Category* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996); Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup>Hans Jonas, 'Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism', *Social Research*, 19 (1959), pp. 430–452; Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginning of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 320–340.

<sup>25</sup>For this analysis I relied on the second, 1963 edition of *The Gnostic Religion*, which expands upon the previous 1958 edition, and includes extensive references to the texts found 18 years earlier in Nag Hammadi.



'Pure Christianity', which is free from 'impure Jewish influences' while manifesting 'Racially Nordic' values. In this manner I wish to show how the search for a 'genuine' Christian doctrine led Rosenberg to adopt the Gnostic structure, and to translate it into a secular system of race and nation.

### The Gnostic Cosmology

The cosmology of Gnosis depicts the world as the creation of a transcendental God that constitutes the source of all things. The moment of creation is described as the beginning of a process of decline and disintegration, in which man 'falls' from the kingdom of God, from ethereal spheres of pure spirituality, into a materialistic and alienated world, created by another God, an earthly and false one, that is opposed in essence to the transcendental God. From that point on, man ought to try and find his way back to the transcendental God. This process is achieved by exposing the transcendental kernel of the 'self', that divine 'spark' that lies within the soul, and connecting with it. Man's ascension beyond his earthly shackles to the divine source within him is identified, as mentioned, with a process of salvation and self-redemption. Despite the different versions that deal with this myth, a few common elements that represent the overall Gnostic paradigm can be identified. Hans Jonas defined Gnosis as a 'dualistic transcendent religion of salvation'.<sup>26</sup> By so doing he pointed to the main elements of Gnostic thought: dualism, transcendentalism and eschatology.<sup>27</sup>

At the heart of Gnostic theology lies a radical, dualistic view that separates God and the world. God, as said, is the essence of transcendentalism and hence a 'foreign' or 'alien' presence in relation to the world. God's foreignness is identified with a 'primal life' that lies beyond the mundane world, a life that is foreign to this world and sometimes even foreign within it.<sup>28</sup> At the other end lies the terrestrial world that contains the familiar cosmic order. This world, according to Gnostic cosmology, is but an illusion that fails to represent reality as it truly is, and is the product of a fashioning God (Demiurge) that stands in stark opposition to the transcendental one. This dualistic worldview carries a moral significance as well: the transcendental God essentially represents positive values of goodness, eternity, wholeness and spiritual abundance. At the same time, the fashioning God, who is identified with the world of immanence, is perceived as absolute evil, representing the negative aspects of temporary, split corporeality, and false, physical existence characterized by suffering. The fact that the transcendental God is foreign to the world of immanence does not enable a sensory or cognitive acknowledgement of his existence, and obliges men to bypass it so as to gain salvation. This means that man has to alienate himself from the cosmic order he is familiar with, as well as from his body and the physical world around him, in order to free himself from the shackles of the God of immanence, enable his soul to break free from the imprisonment of the flesh, and return to the lap of the transcendental God.

Despite its rigid dualistic division, Gnostic cosmology is based upon a monistic principle and acknowledges the being of the hidden God as the source of all things. This bewildering cosmological account, which was referred to by Kurt Rudolph as 'dualism on a monistic background', points to a process of degeneration accompanied by a split in which the monistic transcendental force was transformed into a dualistic immanent world, yet at the same time remained a single and constant source.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, human temporality, which is

<sup>26</sup>Jonas, *The Gnosis*, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>29</sup>Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (New York: Harper, Row Publishers, 1987), p. 58.

applicable to the world of immanence, also derives from an a-temporal moment of creation that lies beyond it.<sup>30</sup> Jonas pointed to the existential aspect of the Gnostic worldview: Gnosis associates the world of immanence with linear temporality, which progresses from the past to the future and lies at the origin of historical consciousness. In contrast to this perception lies a completely different notion of temporality – a time of eternal present, the moment of creation, that is identified with the transcendental world lying beyond the physical one. The origin of this transcendental dimension is prior to the world and its existence is parallel to history.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the connection man makes with his transcendental essence and the experience of redemption occurs through bypassing false historical time, in a dimension of eternal being that is extraneous to the known world. Since the divine ‘spark’ is found in man’s soul, the Gnostic process of redemption has been conceived as a process of self-inquiry, sometimes described as a psychological–anthropological endeavor, in which man studies the nature of the world through an exploration of internal experience.<sup>32</sup> Hence, man coming to know himself is tantamount to his acquiring knowledge of God.<sup>33</sup>

### Gnosis and Modernity

Rosenberg’s thought should be understood in light of the intellectual climate of his time and the discourse of crisis that characterized it. This discourse, whose roots are already to be found in the cultural pessimism of the *fin de siècle*, was further validated in the inter-war period. The catastrophe of the First World War and the undermining of the belief in human progress resulted in a withdrawal from the rational ethos of modernity, and an attempt to find a new founding narrative that would be based upon the theological foundations that lie at the heart of Western culture. Since the process of secularization was perceived as the center of the modern experience, which identified itself as a distressed way of life, many intellectuals of that age sought a way to comprehend and overcome this crisis by drawing on its theological sources. In this context, the Judeo-Christian tradition was perceived not only as the historical origin of modern Western culture, but also as an epistemological infrastructure that underwent a process of ‘secularization’.

The attempts to formulate possible strategies of solution ranged from protecting modernity to an outright negation of it, yet both advocates and critics of modernity wished to comprehend the theological framework from within and not from the outside. By seeing the process of secularization as the acme of a theological crisis, these thinkers wished to shed light on the connection between secularization and the theological infrastructure from which it emerged. Within this framework, the beginning of the twentieth century saw an intensive engagement with issues that mainly dealt with the relation between the theological tradition and heresy. This relation was perceived as harboring

<sup>30</sup>Yotam Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism: The Crisis of Culture, Life Philosophy and Jewish National Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007) (in Hebrew), p. 46.

<sup>31</sup>Jonas, *The Gnosis*, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup>Hotam, *Modern*, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup>The eschatological destination of man and his divine source are reflected in the ‘god-man’ doctrine that constitutes an important conceptual phase in Gnostic theology. This doctrine, also known as the ‘myth of the first man’ or the ‘myth of anthropos’ presents various interpretations of the story of creation and considered the first man as a divine entity and sometimes even God itself. By falling from heaven, man lost its heavenly body and became entrapped in a corporeal one. Hence, ‘the inner man’ who is identified with the divine ‘spark’ of the soul is an integral part of divinity itself. The creation of the first man preceded the creation of the Demiurge that was created with the world of immanence during the ‘fall’. This notion, according to Jonas, is one of the most important elements of Gnostic mythology and it reflects the revolutionary aspect of Gnosis that derives from its rejection of traditional beliefs and the ascription of a new metaphysical status for man in the cosmic order. See Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 92–94 and also Jonas, *The Gnosis*, pp. 216–221.



answers that pertain to the relation between theology and secularization, and enable a new outlook on issues related to modernity. ‘Gnosticism’, which was identified as the most radical and ancient form of heresy, served in this context as a fruitful ground for the formulation of strategies for overcoming the crisis of modernity.<sup>34</sup>

One can indeed find numerous and diverse references to Gnosis in post-World War I German thought.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the concept was so widely used that it was actually disengaged from its original historiographical context, and redefined within the framework of the intellectual discourse concerning the roots of modernity. It thus quickly turned into a genealogical search for the roots of modernity, a search that implied broader insights concerning the human condition and the position of man in the world.<sup>36</sup> Modern Gnostics were not associated with one particular camp: they included liberal Protestants, Volkish nationalists, and even Zionist Jews. The Gnostic framework served all of them as a methodical tool for formulating an alternative philosophy, in the context of a crisis discourse that drew its terminology from the world of theology.

### Nazi *Weltanschauung* as Modern Gnosis

Alfred Rosenberg was executed in Nuremberg on the 16th of October 1946, after the international military tribunal decreed that he was guilty of ‘crimes against peace, war crimes against humanity and of a common plan or conspiracy to commit this crimes’.<sup>37</sup> The international tribunal also determined that Rosenberg made a significant contribution to the formation of the ideology in the name of which these crimes were committed. During his final moments, Rosenberg expressed regret that National Socialism was distorted and misappropriated by opportunists and individuals who lusted after power. Throughout his political career he set a model of uncompromising ideological dedication to Nazi ideology. His staunch idealism combined with his lack of political flexibility often made him a subject of mockery by both political rivals and associates. Even after the fall of the Nazi

<sup>34</sup>On the Gnostic polemic in the interwar period, see Yotam Hotam, ‘Gnosis and Modernity: A Postwar German Intellectual Debate on Secularization, Religion and “Overcoming” the Past’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8:3 (2007), pp. 591–597; Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 23–25, 29–49; Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 10–13.

<sup>35</sup>The most important works on the subject were written in the early 1920s by prominent Protestant theologians like Adolph von Harnack and Karl Barth, or religion scholars like Richard Reitzenstein. Beyond that, Gnostics themes served in works of various thinkers, i.e., German vitalists like Ludwig Klages and Alfred Schuler, C.G. Jung’s depth psychology, and German occultist and theosophical thought, such as Rudolph Steiner and Lanz von Liebenfels. See Rudolph Steiner, *Lucifer-Gnosis. Grundlegende Aufsätze zur Anthroposophie und Berichte aus den Zeitschriften „Luzifer“ und „Lucifer-Gnosis“ 1903–1908* (Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1960); Lanz von Liebenfels, *Theozoologie oder die Kunde von den Sodoms- Äfflingen und dem Götter-Elektron* (Vienna, 1905). For a brief description of Lanz von Liebenfels’s Gnostic thought, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and their influence on Nazi Ideology* (New York: New York University Press, [1985] 1992), pp. 90–123.

<sup>36</sup>The undermining of the rational ethos, and the existential anxiety generated by the war, were regarded by contemporary observers as a modern return of Gnosticism. Such an interpretation saw in the cultural pessimism of the time, with its retreat from the ideal of universal rationalism and the categorical imperative of reason, in favor of a subjectivity that denies any normative value, as a complete loss of faith in the world and an alienation towards it. This tendency, often accompanied by a rejection of progress and scientific positivism, and characterized by an increased use of mythical and religious terminology, was seen as a modern return of Gnosis. Beyond the obvious representatives of this approach, like Jonas and Voegelin, Lazier also traces these views in Jewish intellectuals like Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Leo Strauss, Franz Rosenzweig, and Ernst Bloch. See: Lazier, *God*, pp. 23, 29.

<sup>37</sup>TMWC *International Military Tribunal* (Nuremberg), Vol. I, p. 28.

regime and the exposure of the horrors of war he did not back away from his persistent belief in his ideology. During his stay at his prison cell in Nuremberg, waiting for his execution, he lamented the fact that National Socialism, ‘the noblest of ideas’, was not genuinely realized, and instead served as a tool for manipulation at the hands of senior party members who nihilistically strove for power. It was this conduct, he added, that decided the fate of the Reich and resulted in its ruin.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the 1920s Rosenberg published numerous essays in which he propounded his ideological and philosophical worldview, and his immense literary output turned him into a ‘chief ideologist’ of the National Socialist party.<sup>39</sup> In 1930 he published his most important book *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelischgeistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit*, which up till 1944 sold more than a million copies, and was considered by a bibliography of that period as the most important text of National Socialism aside from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.<sup>40</sup> In the few editions published after 1933, Rosenberg adhered to the original text and did not make any changes, an act that, according to Robert Cecil, stemmed from the fact that he did not consider the political reality that was established in the Reich as the final realization of his vision.<sup>41</sup> As he was sitting in his cell in Nuremberg he wrote: ‘In my old age I half intended to revise my *Myth*, eliminating everything time-conditioned in order to strengthen its basic concept. But the more I search my heart, the less reason I can find for retracting anything’.<sup>42</sup>

Rosenberg regarded himself as part of a German intellectual tradition that understood Germany’s distress in terms of a theological crisis, which requires a spiritual reawakening through the adaptation of Christian religion to particular, national needs. The influence of thinkers like Paul de Lagarde and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, are clearly echoed in Rosenberg’s work.<sup>43</sup> For Rosenberg, the Nazi *Weltanschauung* presupposes a religious attitude.<sup>44</sup> Rosenberg considered atheism as the greatest threat to the strength of the German people, and claimed that it rendered Germans exposed to ‘Jewish materialism’.<sup>45</sup> Resembling other thinkers of the age, he also identified a primordial theological layer within modern society. As he saw it, modern society – which is based upon the rational ethos of progress and secularization – constitutes a secular metamorphosis of the ‘Judeo-Christian’ heritage, and a direct offshoot of the humanist and universal values that derive from it. Therefore, he wished to formulate an alternative view that would supplant the universal message propounded by Christianity and would manifest ‘German values’ with particular spiritual characteristics (*Seelencharakter*). In Rosenberg’s view, these spiritual characteristics are *a priori* and immanent to the life of each race, forming the basis of its unique character. Race, according to Rosenberg, is not a mere physiological or biological datum, but constitutes a spiritual and metaphysical essence that gains its strength by virtue of a ‘cosmic imperative’. This essence, identified as ‘race-soul’ (*Rassenseele*), constitutes the

<sup>38</sup>See Alfred Rosenberg, *Memoirs of Alfred Rosenberg* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis, 1949), p. 325.

<sup>39</sup>Fest, *The Face*, p. 167.

<sup>40</sup>See Fest, *The Face*, pp. 167, 351. Fest relies on a bibliography edited by Karlheinz Rüdiger. For a discussion of the effect of *The Myth* in Nazi Germany, and its importance in the eyes of party seniors and other contemporaries, see Hexham, *Inventing*, pp. 65–78.

<sup>41</sup>Cecil, *The Myth*, p. 83.

<sup>42</sup>Rosenberg, *Memoirs*, p. 90.

<sup>43</sup>For Rosenberg’s testimony regarding Chamberlain’s influence on his worldview, see Rosenberg, *Memoirs*, p. 90; Alfred Rosenberg, *Blut und Ehre: Ein Kampf für Deutsche Wiedergeburt* (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Franz Eher Verlag, 1938), pp. 217–219. As for Rosenberg’s perception of Lagarde’s substantial role in constructing the *völkischen Weltanschauung* see *ibid.*, pp. 228–231.

<sup>44</sup>See Cecil, *The Myth*, p. 84.

<sup>45</sup>Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (München: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1930, [1932]), p. 87.

internal and concealed essence from which the physiological manifestations of the race emanate.

In *The Myth* Rosenberg maintains that 'Race is the image of soul'.<sup>46</sup> This idea constitutes the central theme of his metaphysics and serves as a basic principle of his political theology. In the 1930 introduction to the first edition, Rosenberg writes:

Soul means race seen from within. And, conversely, race is the external side of a soul. To awaken the racial-soul to life means to recognize its highest value, and, under its dominance, to allot to other values their organic position in the State, in art, and in religion.<sup>47</sup>

In his view, each human race is characterized by a unique set of beliefs and values that derives primarily from the existence of a race-soul. The race-soul lends the race 'its own unique internal and external architectonic shape, its characteristic form of appearance and demeanour of lifestyle, and a unique relationship between its forces of will and reason'.<sup>48</sup> Each race is characterized by a guiding ideal, a founding myth, which is essential to its organic development. This myth is fundamentally a-historic and independent of time or place, yet it puts on different forms throughout history. The manifestation of racial essence in a racial form (*Gestalt*) reflects the intensity of the mythic creation of the race. Henceforward all of the apparent manifestations of the race – physiological, historical or artistic – reflect an obscured metaphysical force that stems from the racial-soul and its inherent, unique system of beliefs and values.

Rosenberg portrays a dichotomous, metaphysical system at the center of which two opposing cosmic powers are counterpoised, representing contrasting values and beliefs whose clash dictates the course of human history. On the one hand is the racial element, creator of cultures and affirmer of life, whose most prominent representative is the Nordic race; on the other hand, an anti-racial element, manifested by Judaism and the Catholic Church. According to Rosenberg, the state of affairs of the modern world stems directly from the increasing power of anti-racial forces and the weakening of racial elements.

For Rosenberg, the entire liberal-bourgeois order, including its belief in rational thought, scientific positivism and universal progress, reflects an anti-racial system of values, whose roots are found in the 'spiritual dogmatism' of the Church and Jewish law.<sup>49</sup> He identifies the convergence between Christianity and Judaism in the doctrine of St Paul, whose teachings, 'in spite of all subsequent attempts at reform... still remain the Jewish spiritual basis, the Talmudic oriental aspect of both the catholic and the Lutheran churches'.<sup>50</sup> Paul was the one who universalized Jewish principles, an act that resulted in 'the further spread of racial chaos in the ancient world'.<sup>51</sup> In this context, the Lutheran reformation, which did not reject the Old Testament and continued to acknowledge Pauline doctrine, remained 'an uncompleted revolution' that did not release Christianity from the tight grip of Judaism.

For Rosenberg, these distinctions constitute a key to understanding the ontological distress of the German people. In his view, the existential crisis of the German people stems

---

<sup>46</sup>Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

from the need to subordinate its spiritual values to an ethical and theological system that stands in utter opposition to its racial essence. Therefore, the true struggle lies in the consciousness—mythic level, and takes place in concealed spheres where the forces that fashion the cosmos struggle for world dominance.

### Eschatological Dualism in Rosenberg's Thought

Human history is thus regarded as an unfolding cosmic drama of clashes between racial—mythical forces, which constitute essential *a priori* elements that exist beyond the linear progression of history and yet dictate it. A true understanding of history must come to terms with this underlying metaphysical struggle, and with its 'immutable and basic laws which, although they contend in various forms, nevertheless remain constant in the direction of their effect'.<sup>52</sup> This historical perspective does not merely remain an intellectual insight, but rather constitutes a 'mythic experience' (*Mythisches Erlebnis*) that unveils the hidden forces operating at the heart of history. In such a manner, historical consciousness gains a mystical—reflective insight, and the study of racial history is transposed into a meta-rational search after the inner racial essence, which is extraneous to history yet manifested in it. This awareness of the affinity between 'the struggle of the blood and the intuitive awareness of life's mystique', the realization that these are 'simply two aspects of the same thing',<sup>53</sup> is vested with liberating characteristics. In other words, the study of racial history amounts to a search after a hidden, internal, racial essence, and its unveiling is regarded as an act of redemption. The striving for this mythical reckoning is tantamount to the Gnostic search after the Gnosis, that is to say, a search for meta-rational knowledge that is internal and hidden as a basic condition for salvation. According to Rosenberg, out of the acknowledgement of the mythical struggle of forces that is enacted at the heart of history, an old-new myth shall emerge, a 'faith founded in blood' that would restore the will of the German people and release it from its shackles. Racial history is nothing but an external reflection of that metaphysical dynamics generated by the actions of cosmic forces, and its unveiling enables a 'genuine' understanding of human history.

This dichotomous historical system that evolves out of an ongoing struggle between opposing spiritual values constitutes the dualistic infrastructure of Rosenberg's Gnostic worldview. Along this axis the Nordic-soul, which embodies the values of honor (*Ehre*) and inner freedom (*innere freiheit*), struggles against the 'Roman racial chaos', an anti-racial essence that is embodied by the 'Judeo-Christian' church and its doctrine of universal love. On the one end stands an Aryan racial element that embodies life, vitality and cultural generation, while at the opposite end stands an anti-racial, universal element that is identified with the negation of life, static dogmatism, chaos and cultural degeneration. These two elements, engaged in a state of constant conflict by virtue of a cosmic imperative, move towards a moment of decision in which one side will overcome the other and gain dominance over the entire system:

If German blood will disappear from Europe... western civilization in its entirety will disappear with it... we are facing a critical decision. Either we rise to the occasion and revive and purify the ancient blood and the supreme will to fight, or that the last of the German-Western values of morality and political governance will sink into the polluted floods of urban men and women.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>54</sup>Alfred Rosenberg, *Gestaltung der Idee: Reden und Aufsätze von 1933–1935* (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1936), p. 82.

Rosenberg sees his era as a watershed, a decisive moment in which the fate of the entire Western civilization will be decided either to life or annihilation. The crisis point that unveiled the destructive forces that operate behind modern culture was the First World War. Yet despite the harsh defeat, or better yet because of it, 'the old Nordic racial soul awakened to a heightened consciousness'.<sup>55</sup> The shock that was caused by the War and its aftermath of political upheavals, forced the Germans to rediscover their sources of power and to 'experience them anew with such force as no previous generation has known'.<sup>56</sup>

According to Rosenberg's cosmology, the German catastrophe in the First World War is an event that expedites salvation: the victimization and suffering of the German people are a necessary evil, an outcome of the continuous denial of their racial-soul, and of the increase in the forces hostile to it. This suffering deepens the alienation between the German people and the world around it, and therefore enhances the process of inner search that culminates in a mythical acknowledgement of the racial-soul and its liberating forces. The Gnostic principle of salvation comes clearly to the fore: the familiar world order originates in an illusion created by a false and enslaving force, symbolized by universal and anti-racial elements headed by Judaism and the Roman Catholic Church. This force, that is unveiled in the state of the modern world, constitutes a negative and alienating essence that prevents the Nordic man from acknowledging his true racial-character. The racial-soul, similar to the Gnostic 'spark', reflects 'real life', 'reality' as it is, and acknowledging it shall release the Nordic man from the shackles of an oppressive and false reality. However, contrary to transcendental Gnostic salvation, racial salvation occurs in an earthly, secular and political sphere. This inversion between the transcendental and the immanent constitutes the essence of Rosenberg's political eschatology, and enables the transposition of transcendental salvation into the earthly sphere.

### Gnosticism as 'Nordic Christianity'

According to Rosenberg, acknowledging the struggle of values (*Das Ringen der Werte*) at the core of history projects on the political struggles of the current time.<sup>57</sup> This distinction leads Rosenberg to identify the opponents of the Church throughout history as significant agents of the racial genus and the 'Nordic Spirit'. Hence his special interest in heretic groups in general and Gnostic cults in particular:

The history of the Albigensians, Waldenses, Cathars, Arnoldists, Stedingers, Huguenots, the reformed church and the Lutherans, as well as of the martyrs of free inquiry and the heroes of Nordic philosophy, draws an impressive picture of a gigantic contest for character values, those prerequisites of soul and spirit without the assertion of which there could have been neither European nor national culture.<sup>58</sup>

In this manner, resistance to the Church becomes a defining feature of the Aryan genus throughout history, while the heretics that were persecuted and outcast from the Church become the historical agents of the new German religion: 'Everything which a slavish

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

mentality called love gathered under Rome, everything which strove for honor and freedom of soul, parted more and more consciously from the Roman spiritual world'.<sup>59</sup>

In his memoirs, written while in the detention center in Nuremberg, Rosenberg addressed the special interest he had in the Albigensian sect and its Gnostic teachings:

On a trip to the Bretagne, I felt the desire to go even farther south to the country of the Albigenses. The struggles and fate of this huge sect of the Cathari had always interested me and, on closer acquaintance, moved me deeply. A queer movement, combining the religious desire for freedom of will and character which was essentially west Gothic, with the late-Iranic mysticism that had reached France by way of Italy after the crusaders had come in contact with the Orient. Since the Cathari, that is 'the Pure Ones', wanted to remain Christians, they chose from among the various epistles that of John. Against the religion of the worldly power of the church of Peter they upheld the teaching of the Baraclete, the Merciful Saviour and God of Mercy. They rejected the Old Testament, avoided the use of any and all Jewish names – a significant attitude, different from that of the later Calvinists and Puritans who also searched for the 'pure' teachings – and shunned even the name Mary. The crucifix to them appeared an unworthy symbol since, they claimed, nobody would venerate the rope with which a human being, even thought he be a martyr, had been hanged.<sup>60</sup>

These remarks manifest Rosenberg's attitude towards heresy in general and Gnostic heresy in particular. He identifies the Cathars as representatives of pure Christianity, who were able to disengage themselves from the political and ideological oppression of the Church, and free themselves from the influence of Jewish theology. The Cathars' rejection of official Church doctrine and their adherence to a dualistic worldview, which considered true divinity as a pure spiritual entity that is foreign to the corporeal world and the existing cosmological order, symbolize for Rosenberg 'a religious desire to the freedom of the will and personality', which are clear Nordic values. Additional support to this view can be found in *The Myth*. Relating to the thriving heretic cults in the south of France and their utter annihilation by the Church during the Albigensian Crusade, Rosenberg writes: 'This fundamentally Germanic idea, which even today is only partially realized, cost southern France its finest blood, and was smothered forever with its extermination in this region.'<sup>61</sup> The straight line Rosenberg draws between the extermination of Albigensian heresy by the Church and the dilution of the Nordic blood in France, points to the inherent connection he sees between blood and consciousness, racial physiology and a theological system of beliefs. In other words, Rosenberg identifies in the Gnostic heretics not just spiritual agents of Aryan genius throughout history, but also its biological ancestors. His sympathetic attitude towards Gnostic heresy is further established in *The Myth*:

The Gospel of St John, which still retains an aristocratic spirit, strove to defend Christianity against this collective bastardisation, orientalisation, and Judaisation. About the year 150, Marcion, who was a Greek, once again represented the Nordic idea of a world order based on organic tension and hierarchical structure. This was in direct contrast to the Semitic conception of a capricious god who exercised a boundless despotism. Marcion therefore rejected the Old Testament as the

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>60</sup>Rosenberg, *Memoir*, p. 99.

<sup>61</sup>Rosenberg, *Der Mythos*, p. 104.



book of laws of so false a deity. Similar efforts were made by a few of the Gnostics. But Rome, now racially polluted beyond redemption, was utterly committed to Africa and Syria, and smothered the simple essence of Jesus. . . The conflicts of the earliest centuries of our era are not to be understood except as struggles of racial souls against the Hydra headed racial chaos.<sup>62</sup>

These words echo the theological debate prevalent in the 1920s, and especially the influence of Adolf von Harnack's book *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (1920), which led to a wide popularization of Gnosticism at that time. Rosenberg partly adopts some of Harnack's assumptions concerning Marcionite dualism being the cornerstone of true Christianity. Rosenberg's emphasis on Marcion's Greek origins may point to his adoption of Harnack's view of Gnosis as an 'acute Hellenization of Christianity'<sup>63</sup> – a view that allows Rosenberg to rescue Christianity out of its Jewish genealogy and relocate its roots in the ancient Hellenic world, which he identifies as one of the most glorious Nordic civilizations in history.<sup>64</sup> In his search for an 'original Christianity', free from Jewish influences and exempt from Paul's doctrine, Rosenberg found in Marcion and the Gnostics of the late Antiquity genuine precursors of 'Nordic Christianity'. Their struggle against the Church was perceived by him as part of the mythic struggle of racial forces against the 'Roman racial chaos'.

Thus, Rosenberg's interest in ancient Gnosticism was not solely confined to narrow intellectualism. His Manichean view of history as the battling ground of hostile mythic forces, as well as his view of the Church as embodying the anti-racial force throughout history, led him to formulate a theological system that is antithetical to the Church. In such a manner, Gnosis, which was marked by the Church as the most severe form of heresy, served him as a theological model to structure a 'Nordic' worldview.

### Faith Founded in Blood: 'The Sacred Union of God and Nature'

At the center of Rosenberg's worldview lies a rigid dualistic metaphysical system that distinguishes between two opposing forces that struggle for world dominance. The dialectical tension between these poles generates the necessary vital motion for the organic development of life. The dualistic awareness of life's dynamic rhythm necessitates a vital system of values that corresponds to 'nature's eternal flow', while the static Monist dogmatism of the Church, that adheres to absolute truths, is perceived by Rosenberg as opposing nature's laws, and constitutes an instrument of spiritual oppression. These two polar elements constitute parts of a unified whole, and they derive their existence from each other. 'Polarity', writes Rosenberg, 'always manifests itself in the simultaneity of opposites, not as chronologically alternating with one another. The concept of good is incomprehensible without that of evil, and only receives its delimitation by it'.<sup>65</sup>

Spiritual polarity derives from a 'unified whole', a primary system that maintains a dialectical tension that is necessary for the organic formation of life. This dialectic dictates the dynamics of life, and without such a clash between opposing poles, life and consciousness cannot exist. Thus, Rosenberg formulates an ontology that is based upon an eternal conflict: struggle, as he considers it, is the primary defining element of life, and only through it can a particular racial life be formed. Racial life, resulting from an inner

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pp. 92–93.

<sup>63</sup>See Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion. Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1924), pp. 9–10.

<sup>64</sup>See Rosenberg, *Der Mythus*, pp. 54ff.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

realization, is formed out of a conflict that emphasizes racial consciousness and forms the particular identity of the race as opposed to its antithesis. The existence of the race is therefore preconditioned by the existence of an 'ultimate other', i.e., the anti-racial element that is embodied in Judaism, the Roman Catholic Church and their various agents.

This position enables Rosenberg to acknowledge metaphysical dialectics and even to justify its existence, yet it also establishes a normative hierarchy between the two poles, pointing to the supremacy of the one over the other. In such a manner, Rosenberg stresses the primary status of 'life' that is associated with the racial-dynamic element over the dogmatic, static, life-negating element. This distinction enables him to demarcate the racial element that is vested with various features such as blood, life, and race as the primary source of life, nature, and human culture. The racial element serves as a basis for all organic growth, human, social, and cultural organization, and can therefore be identified as a Monistic element that constitutes the foundation of the world and of nature. This points to the conceptual reversal Rosenberg makes in the Gnostic structure: Racial life is depicted as immanent nature that encompasses ontological existence, yet at the same time constitutes a transcendental being: 'The sacred union of god and nature is the primal ground of our being, represented in freedom of the soul, crowned by the fruitfulness of its works'.<sup>66</sup> Racial life embodies at the same time a hidden metaphysical essence manifested in the race-soul, and an overt physical essence that constitutes its corporeal embodiment. In such a manner the racial immanent element becomes a primal source from which the entirety of life flows.

The concept of blood, which forms the center of Rosenberg's metaphysics, is perhaps the best illustration of the unity between an immanent nature and a transcendent sublime. Blood, as previously mentioned, is not a mere physiological datum, but expresses the spiritual vitality of the race, that deep-seated metaphysical essence referred to as 'race-soul'. The transcendental element (the soul) is inherently embedded in the racial physiological system (the blood) and dictates the values of the racial life. In such a manner, the traditional division between body and soul (whose most radical formulation can be found in Gnosticism) turns into a holistic, monistic worldview that regards the two as a single unity. This holistic system reflects a monistic unity, a primal, original life, that deteriorates into a degenerative, split condition, as a result of the intervention of an alienating element, i.e., the transcendental element, embodied in the false causality of the existing world order. The function of the inferior immanent element in the Gnosis is superseded by the transcendental element that is identified with the 'spiritual dogmatism' of Judaism and Christianity, and is embodied in the 'individualistic system of intellectual absolutes' that is at the heart of modernity.<sup>67</sup> This element is perceived as being hostile to immanent nature, and constitutes the foundation of the existing world order. The transcendental element functions as an alienating element, similar to the fashioning God in Gnostic thought, and constitutes a barrier that stands between the racial man and the race-soul residing in him. The perception of a transcendental God derives from 'a world view which sees creation merely as an arbitrary god, [and] recognizes no inner worth of man'. It considers the world as created 'ex nihilo', and declares this God to be 'omnipotent, and intervening in the affairs of the world from the outside'. This view, contends Rosenberg, 'does not acknowledge organic laws', and 'denies the internal law of natural causality'.<sup>68</sup>

Reason and intellect, which are identified as secularized avatars of the theological, 'dogmatic' elements that lie at the heart of Judeo-Christian monotheism, alienating the

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 586.

racial-man from the race-soul residing in him, must be overcome in order to expedite redemption. To that end the Nordic man must bypass the obstacle of Reason and connect in an unmediated fashion with his 'inner self', namely his racial-soul. In this context the notion of experience (*Erlebnis*) occupies a central position in Rosenberg's philosophy, and serves as a central axis around which he structures his racial metaphysics of salvation. It is here that the metaphysical function of Rosenberg's concept of myth is revealed. Myth is a 'fashioning force of type', a synthesis of the entirety of organic forces that are at work at the center of racial existence. As such, it serves as a window through which pneumatic powers can be recognized and acknowledged, but also as a channel through which they can be directed towards earthly manifestation. In such a manner myth is reflected in all representations of racial life – in art, religion and politics. Myth cannot be comprehended by Reason – it has to be experienced. The 'mythic experience' enables the suspension of the rational element that is associated with the transient, false, and existing order, and beckons the connection to the living, spiritual element that is found beyond historical temporality, in the dimension of an eternal present. 'Truth', writes Rosenberg, 'does not signify what is logically correct or false. This truth is personal and is known only intuitively'.<sup>69</sup> He adds: 'even if the absolute truth were revealed to us, we could neither grasp nor understand this because it would be devoid of space, time and cause'.<sup>70</sup> Thus, Rosenberg objects to positivist thought, which aspires to provide absolute and universal answers. To his mind, any such attempt is doomed to fail. The only truth that exists is an 'organic truth', and it can only be revealed through inner reflection and acknowledgement of the mythic experience of the soul.

The unveiling of the truth therefore necessitates a subjective act of introspection as man unites with his soul. This act involves a suspension of cognition and rational consciousness, while making a leap beyond the category of temporality that resides at the heart of consciousness and history. For that purpose Rosenberg sees the act (*Tat*) as preceding thought. The creative act, as opposed to thought, manifests the impulse of life, the vitality and dynamism that characterize racial life. It is a primary and intuitive product of the will, and for that reason it is conspicuously related to the notion of experience, as it harbors liberating qualities. The act, therefore, constitutes a reflective manifestation of the racial-soul, which enables the unleashing of mythic forces embodied in the soul, while channeling them for the creation of genuine racial life.

### Racial Eschatology: In Search for the Race-Soul

As mentioned, Rosenberg's view of myth lacks any corporeal or historical dimension. It originates in an a-temporal sphere that is extraneous to history, and forms itself out of the race's religious experience of its inner, pneumatic essence. Its flow runs from the dimension of eternal present to the linear, historical dimension of temporality, and it subjects its appearance to the spirit of the age, the climate of the concrete era. The myth allows the expression of infinity through the finite, the metaphysical through the physical, and it is a symbol and an allegory to an abstract principle that does not comply with the laws of Reason and sensory perception. Therefore, writes Rosenberg, the myth cannot be perfected, 'it can merely take on other new forms'.<sup>71</sup> The myth should not be viewed solely as a mythological narrative, and should not be reduced to a mere account, representation, or

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 674.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 666.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 663.

any other object. Thus, the Germanic myth is not mythological, and should not be sought after in the depths of the past. It is a-temporal and derives its power from the intensity of the mythical realization of the race. Nordic mythology, according to Rosenberg, constitutes only a coarse and archaic form of the mythic experience, and it can no longer express its real essence. It is but a 'frivolous symbolization of nature',<sup>72</sup> and reflect a primitive and naïve era. Therefore, claims Rosenberg, a new worldview, or a new myth should be formulated: one that would correspond to the spirit of the age and enable a renewed acknowledgement of the internal forces that are manifested in the Nordic race. This myth, which is to be founded upon the metaphysical power of blood, should constitute a new religious system that would supersede degenerate Christianity and its old sacraments.<sup>73</sup>

The myth thus constitutes a channel that bridges the corporeal, overt, and transient element of the race and its pneumatic, hidden, and eternal element. A 'mythical' reading of history facilitate an understanding of that hidden essence that dictates human experience and the metaphysical laws found at the heart of world and nature. Furthermore, this acknowledgement enables the racial man to overcome his feelings of alienation – a feeling that derives from his enslavement to the false laws of the existing order – and will eventually result in the realization of his eschatological destination. Seen through a Gnostic perspective, the myth functions as 'Gnosis': it constitutes a meta-rational knowledge that involves an experience that transcends or bypasses consciousness, and enables a connection with the hidden divine element of the soul. The notion of striving after a 'genuine' knowledge as a source of redemption is one of the main tenets of Rosenberg's metaphysics. Yet in a similar manner to Gnostic thought, Rosenberg also stresses the act of searching after knowledge rather than the obtainment of knowledge itself: the constant striving for a facilitates understanding is driven by the immanent tension of human experience, split between two dimensions of being and time. By emphasizing the dynamic essence at the heart of the Nordic worldview, Rosenberg sees becoming (*Werden*), which involves constant dynamic motion, as the purest manifestation of racial being (*Sein*).<sup>74</sup> This constant striving after mythical knowledge is formulated in conspicuous Gnostic–theological terms:

Every creature pursues its life with an aim even if it be unknown to it. The human soul also has a destiny, that is, to arrive at a pure knowledge of itself and a consciousness of god. But this soul is scattered and spread out in the world of the senses, of space and time. The senses are active in it and weaken – at first – the power of spiritual concentration. The precondition of inner workings is, therefore, the withdrawal of all exterior powers, the extinguishing of all images and allegories. These inner workings are meant to draw heaven to oneself, as Jesus is said to have testified and demanded of the powerful of soul. This attempt by the mystic thus demands the exclusion of the world as idea, in order to become, where possible, conscious, as pure subject, of the metaphysical essence which lives within us. Since this is not completely possible, the idea of god is created as a new object of this soul in order ultimately to announce the identical value of soul and god.<sup>75</sup>

These words point to the Gnostic infrastructure of Rosenberg's metaphysics: man's search after 'genuine knowledge' takes place in inner spiritual spheres, and is depicted as

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Rosenberg, *Der Mythos*, p. 129.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., pp. 148–149.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

a process whereby the soul strives towards its self-knowledge. This soul contains a divine element (similar to the manner in which it contains the divine 'spark' in Gnostic thought), which is identified with divinity itself and its knowledge is tantamount to knowledge of God himself. That is to say, the racial man's internal journey of spiritual self-awareness is an act of redemption and of merging into god. Such a move is made possible only through bypassing the world of the senses, time and space, and becoming part of a pure subjectivity that resides beyond space and the temporal–historical dimension, in a dimension of 'eternal present'.

Rosenberg dedicates the third chapter in the first section of *The Myth*, titled *Mystik und Tat* [Mysticism and Action], to the teachings of Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth-century Dominican monk, whom he refers to as 'the greatest apostle of the Nordic west who gave us our religion'.<sup>76</sup> Rosenberg's interest in Eckhart and his teachings stems first and foremost from the revolutionary and anti-Catholic halo that is ascribed to his figure. Yet more importantly, it appears that Rosenberg found in Eckhart's theology of the 'aristocratic-soul' a firm theological foundation on which he could establish his racial metaphysics, and especially his observations concerning the race-soul. The concept of the 'aristocratic-soul', which is tantamount to God himself is used by Rosenberg to stress the theological and epistemological distinction between the 'Nordic religion' and 'Judeo-Christian dogmatism': Nordic religion is founded upon immediate experience and direct contact with the element of life. It acknowledges the dynamic becoming of the subject in the world and the generative powers of his soul, qualities that derive from that unity between soul and God. As mentioned, the Nordic life experience is a product of pure subjectivity, deprived of any notion of conceptualization and containing a dimension that is extraneous to temporality yet is present and realized in it at the same time. This existential category, of a being that is authentic to itself and aware of the basic principles that dictate its inner being, Rosenberg calls *Dasein*. Against it, he recognizes a degenerative category of being that is founded upon external rules, such as the Mosaic law, which he refers to as *Sosein*. *Dasein* is a manifestation of a subject that creates himself out of himself, that undergoes constant becoming from the inside, towards the original and primal element of his being. On the theological level this concept symbolizes an incessant striving of the self towards that spark that constitutes a point of convergence between soul and God, subject and object. 'The soul', writes Rosenberg, 'does not find any abstract rules on the outside. It does not move toward a goal established outwardly. It thus in no case goes outside of itself, but comes to itself'.<sup>77</sup>

This move manifests Rosenberg's eschatological worldview, yet its Gnostic nature is fully revealed via the presence of the dichotomous element, the *Sosein*, from which the Aryan man must be released. *Sosein* can be best defined as the being of man in a world handed to him by the Creator.<sup>78</sup> Rosenberg exemplifies the metaphysical divide between these two notions of being through a juxtaposition of the Jewish myth of creation *ex nihilo* and the Nordic myth that 'does not recognize the idea of nothingness'. The Nordic myth of creation, Rosenberg adds, 'speaks only of a fluctuation, change, chaos. It conceives the cosmos as having arisen from an ordering principle working against chaos. It reflects on the idea of one who brings order, but not one who creates something out of an original void'.<sup>79</sup> The concept *Dasein* therefore signifies eternal being, an *a priori* being that is constantly present in the

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 674.

<sup>78</sup>James B. Whisker, *The Philosophy of Alfred Rosenberg: Origins of the National Socialist Myth* (California: The Noontide Press, 1990), p. 130.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

world. This being is unbounded by time and space and is not subject to God since it is identical to it. At the same time, *Sosein* signifies a being that regards the world as the labor of an omnipotent God that created the world out of the void. This worldview, Rosenberg contends, constitutes the foundation of Judeo-Christian metaphysics, and defines man as a being shackled to an extraneous divine law that never allows him to be genuinely free. The gap between the human and the divine, and man's constant striving after a divine objective source that is extraneous to himself, are seen by Rosenberg as a theological pattern that results in a materialistic and rational worldview that seeks absolute eternal truths and thereby negates the generative power of the human subject. Moreover, the definition of the moment of creation as a point in time beyond which nothing exists dictates a deterministic or 'dogmatic' view, which sees history as a linear construct that is eventually embodied in Christian eschatology and the Enlightenment notion of progress. This epistemology enslaves the racial-soul to the categorical imperatives of reason, and negates – by its subjection to external laws – its acknowledgement of its internal essence and spiritual values.

The Nordic man finds himself caught between these two modes of existence: on the one hand, he is shackled to the false causality of the existing order, and his consciousness is subjected to the narrow and artificial categories of reason; yet on the other hand he harbors an inner element, primordial and concealed, that reflects 'authentic being'. This element reflects his true essence, the 'true' order of things with which he must commune. Rosenberg quotes Eckhart saying: 'No vessel can hold two kinds of drink in itself: if it is to hold wine, one must pour out the water so that not a drop remains. . . for often, what is life to the one, is death to the other'.<sup>80</sup> These words convey the essence of the Volkish confession (*völkisches Bekenntnis*) and stand in stark opposition to the universal teachings of the Church; the racial essence of man determines his belief and way of life. It is man who shapes faith and not the other way round, as the Church decrees. Therefore, if Nordic man desires to live he must follow his internal compass, and break free of the dogmatism 'that poisoned our souls and European racial heritage'.<sup>81</sup> He harbors in him, in an *a priori* manner, the knowledge he needs in order to gain salvation. This knowledge, similar to Gnosis, is a meta-rational and essentially religious knowledge whose acquisition involves the suspension of reason and connection to the emotional and experiential aspect of the soul. In this manner, Rosenberg contends, 'the ancient conflict between knowledge (*Wissen*) and belief (*Glauben*) is resolved'.<sup>82</sup> True knowledge, according to Rosenberg, stems from the subject's experience of his own organic truth, and constitutes a kind of 'self memory' (*Sich Erinnern*) that is conveyed as a conscious acknowledgement of the world.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the racial-mythic experience is the prior foundation of knowledge, which takes place in linear, historical time. The myth, as the most conspicuous manifestation of this inner organic truth, is the key to man's genuine knowledge of his being in the world. 'We know', Rosenberg writes, 'that we all have one longing; to emerge from "darkness into light", to move from our earthly bonds into an eternal unknown'.<sup>84</sup> This unshackling is enabled through 'conscious self reliance [that] rejects the supreme values of the cultural cycles overlaying us'.<sup>85</sup> In other words, eschatological liberation will be achieved once the Nordic man is released from the shackles of bourgeois society and Western rationalism that are founded upon the law of the Jewish God, and enter into

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 669.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid. p. 684.



the mythic sphere of his being, acknowledging the generative powers of his racial-soul and merging with it. Obeying this inner law – via Rosenberg’s categorical transfiguration of the Gnostic structure – will allow genuine redemption in this world.

## Conclusions

At the heart of Rosenberg’s philosophy lies an attempt to formulate a new system of values, a philosophical and spiritual framework based on racial and nationalistic ideals. This philosophy is founded upon a denial of the Christian worldview and the existing political and social order that is perceived as its secularized manifestation. Christianity serves as an Archimedean point of reference from which Rosenberg derives most of his historiosophic and political views: ‘At the focal point of all spiritual-psychological discussion’, Rosenberg writes, ‘stands Christianity, its personages, its relationship to the peoples and to the problems of our epoch’.<sup>86</sup> Hence, his choice to found his thought upon the Gnostic model serves his aspiration to formulate a theology that would stand as a spiritual and ethical alternative to Christianity.

The Nazi *Weltanschauung*, as formulated by Rosenberg, offered an appealing mixture of political and spiritual salvation that provided many with consolation and hope in a general climate of uncertainty and despair. It addressed the religious feelings of the masses and at the same time offered solutions to daily concerns. By translating theological patterns into the language of political praxis, and by shifting the promise of redemption from the remote transcendental sphere to the material and immediate world, Rosenberg’s philosophy was capable of providing a feeling of national and spiritual regeneration. The main attraction of this worldview may be attributed to the Gnostic tension at its heart, a tension that aided in the creation of a simple and dichotomous worldview. This dichotomy between absolute good and evil enabled the purgation of the German nation while blaming the Jews and the Church for the harsh times Germany suffered. This was accompanied by a rejection of the existing political and social order, and the demand for a total revolution of life, starting with the spiritual amendment of reconnecting the German nation with its inner racial-soul. By transposing the source of worldly occurrences from the material sphere of objective reality to the pneumatic and subjective sphere of the racial-soul, redemption now became a product of the German will. This worldview was impervious to any external criticism, resistant to any refutation or rational analysis, and derived its justification from its own internal logic, based on an abstruse belief in its autosuggestive powers to create a new man and a new world in its own image.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my grateful thanks to Shulamit Volkov from the Tel Aviv University for her invaluable and tireless mentorship; to Na’ama Sheffi from the Sapir College for her critical comments and ongoing encouragement and assistance; to Shalom Ratzabi and Ron Margolin from the Tel Aviv University for helpful discussions on religion and secularization; to Yotam Hotam from the University of Haifa, who provided me with some valuable insights on Gnosis and Modernity; and finally to the journal’s anonymous referees for their highly useful comments.

<sup>86</sup>Rosenberg, *Memoirs*, p. 88.

### Notes on Contributor

**Amit Varshizky** is a lecturer in modern history at the Academic College of Sapir and assistant director of *Sapir Forum for Debate and Research of Culture*. Currently he is working on his PhD at the School of Historical Studies, Tel Aviv University. His research, entitled *Mind and Soul in the Nazi Weltanschauung*, focuses on the various perspectives of the Nazi view of soul and consciousness.